



Electricity Generating
Station, Quayside, 1950s

Cambridge ELECTRICITY Chronicle

Reports from Cambridge newspapers 1888 to 1990, compiled by Mike Petty

Entries marked [P] are taken from 'Trams in Cambridge' by Nigel Pennick, 1983

1889

1889

Cambridge Improvement Commissioners consider four schemes for the provision of electricity, Council favour municipal electric generating scheme [P.14]

1890

1890

Obtain Cambridge Electric Order

1891

1891

Bailey Grundy & Barrett produced first lighting 1891, sold goodwill to Cambridge Electric Supply Co 1896; supplied private electrical generating plant to colleges & country houses till 1914-18 war; sale premises 1973 [271.7.5]

1891

The building where the first electricity for lighting in Cambridge was generated is now on the market. The property, No.2 Market Passage, was the premises of Bailey, Grundy and Barrett, electrical contractors. In 1891 the firm produced the first electricity for lighting in the city with a gas engine and a dynamo installed in the basement. In those early days private electrical generating plants were

supplied by the company to several of the Cambridge colleges. Until after the 1914-18 war such plants continued to be installed in country houses in outlying districts. As this business declined, the company moved into wireless, the design and making of temperature control equipment for laboratories and other specialised apparatus 73 03 01

1891

Council authorised to borrow £35,000 for scheme but run into technical & financial difficulties [P.14]

1892

1892

Cambridge Electric Supply Company established, begin construction of power station at Thompson's Lane, Magdalene College objections unsuccessful [P14]

1892

Electric light introduced into ten colleges & business establishments [1.4, P14]

1895

1895

Electric floodlighting installed to illuminate ice skating at Newnham [P14]

1897

1897 09 04

An extraordinary general meeting of the Cambridge Electric Supply co. ltd was held at the Company's offices, Thompson's Lane, Cambridge. The chairman reported that their first capital had been £40,000 which had been spent on plant and the necessary things to equip the station. They had gone over that and had borrowed £2,250 from the bank. The business of the company was increasing and the capital must be increased too. Now was the time for shareholders to reap the reward of their enterprise if the use of electric light became universal in Cambridge 1897 08 04

1898

1898 09

St Mary's substation equipped & Guildhall sub-station demolished [2.10.11]

1898 11 05 c

That electricity is a great boon everyone is prepared to admit, but we shall enjoy better when scientists have solved more of its mysteries, and when it has dropped the tendency to drop and die away just at the time when it is most required. The New Theatre is one establishment where loss of light means loss of money. The incandescent lamps with which the interior is efficiently illuminated drooped and finally the current failed all together. Having been accustomed to brilliant electric light, the fact that the theatre was illuminated by means of ordinary lamps gave rise to much comment amongst the audience. As far as the stage was concerned the management had taken the precaution of retaining the gas. However before the performance commenced the truant current resumed its ordinary course and gave the steady light which continued the remainder of the evening 1898 11 05

1899

1899 05 16

Messrs Bailey, Grundy and Barrett, electrical engineers were summoned by the Cambridge Electric Supply Company for connecting a wire in a house in Bridge Street house without their consent. The Supply Company had laid mains to Mr Nichol's house with a meter, and a wire leading from the meter to light the house. The wires were placed there in 1893 and were temporarily reconstructed last year. Subsequently Bailey's were called in to put in wires for additional lights for the house. The new wire was connected with the main whereby it was possible for current to be consumed without being register by the meter 1899 05 16

1902

1902 02 12

Cambridge Electric Supply Company reported that they would probably outgrow the present site, in Thompson's Lane. They had secured a site at Chesterton, situated at the side of the railway line so they would be able to bring coals into the yard and they had also arranged for the use of the river and the road. The site would not be required yet but as no other spot on the river was so placed they were justified in buying the land. CDN 1902 02 12

1902 12 27

The demand for electric light is continually on the increase and Messrs Millington and Everett, King's Parade, Cambridge, have a good show of high-class electric lamps which they are selling at 1s. These lamps are guaranteed to be much more economical than the ordinary electric lamp. Telephone and electric bells are also well displayed here. CDN 1902 12 27

1904

1904

St Pauls & All Saints churches lit by electricity [1.5]

1907

1907 06 27

Mr E.E. Marshall, electrician of Castle Street said he was formerly employed at the University Laboratory and afterwards had sole charge of an electric plant at Holt. In 1905 he installed the electric light at Leonard Mortimer's hairdresser's saloon in All Saints Passage. Messrs Bailey, Grundy & Barrett said the work did not test high but not low enough to condemn it. The claim was settled 07 06 27a

1908

1908 04 04

Sir – the idea of electricity generated by peat gas appeals to residents in the Fen country where peat is so plentiful. The black swamp possesses theoretical heat values not far below coal when thoroughly dried. When economically farmed, stored, dried and made fit for burning by steam boilers or 'producer gas plants' it becomes a formidable rival to coal with its ever-fluctuating price – James Smith 08 04 04a

1912

1912 02 10

Cambridge Daily News becomes first newspaper printed by electricity in Cambridge, is sub-station at New Theatre [1.13]

1913

1913 02 21

Electric supply company report 13 02 21 p10 CIP

1913 02 28

Electric Supply Company annual meeting 13 02 28 p4 CIP

1923

1923 11 21

Mr R C Pierce the manager of the Cambridge electricity Supply Company said that there was there had been three central generating stations built in 1891 of which Cambridge was one. They were built to prove that the turbines could work for in those days everyone was afraid because of the speed of the machine. The dynamos gave trouble and used to burn out at inconvenient moments. Cambridge started in 1892 and was run by very carefully trained men whose motto was "Never mind what happens, keep it going". Some people thought that the power in the town was very costly but it compared favourably with others of the same kind 23 11 21

1925

1925 02 13

The Bill to electrify Cambs., Beds & Hunts comes before Parliament this session. A great generating station will be erected at Lt Barford. At first they propose to develop the central area including St Neots, St Ives and Ely & to give a supply in bulk to Cambridge and Newmarket. To help the electrical development of the railways it is proposed to link up with the transmission lines of the North Metropolitan Electric Power Supply Company and to afford a supply to the main railway lines within the area 25 02 13

1927

1927 07 16

virtual reorganisation of the Cambridge Electricity Supply Company by association with Edmundsons Electricity Corporation, speculation over reactions of Corporation, perhaps a reduction of price ... "High time Cambridge brought more up-to-date in public & private electricity supply"[1.9, 1.11]

1927 12 10

Expanding net-work of electricity power cables reach Cambridge & one of terminals installed in field adjoining the Observatory, Madingley Road [1.12]

1929

1929 01 23

Caxton Rural Council received a letter from the Beds. Cambs. and Hunts Electricity Company seeking permission to fix an overhead wire from St Ives to Eltisley. The line would go through Hilton and Papworth and be a great boon. Mr Moss asked if the wires would be high enough to clear a man on a loaded cart. He had seen the wires near Cambridge and they seemed very low. The Chairman said this was a matter for the owners of the land. He pointed out that it was the top wire that was the dangerous one, and the lower ones were merely guards. 29 01 23

1929 12 04

An explosion in St Andrew's Street plunged a considerable part of Cambridge's shopping centre into darkness. The cover plate of a junction box of the Electric Supply Company was blown off and several people had a narrow escape from injury. Flames leapt up from the hole and blazed fiercely. For some minutes there was great excitement, people rushing hither and thither. Police whistles were blown and the Fire Brigade turned out but found that the fire had already been put out by a motorist with a fire-extinguisher from his car. Shops and houses in a large area were deprived of light and the printing of the 6.30 edition of the C.D.N. was held up. 29 12 04

1930

1930

New Electricity Company offices & showrooms opened 4 Market hill [Cam p109]

1930 08 20

The Beds, Cambs and Hunts Electricity Company sought permission to erect a power line across the Waterbeach Lodge estate. They wanted to supply the village with electricity and had secured way-leave for the whole route apart from this one pole. But the owner, T.C. Lethbridge said the overhead wires would cross a paddock and he would be unable to let it. He wanted an underground cable laid instead 30 08 20c

1931

1931 05 08

When R.C. Pierce took up an appointment with the Cambridge Electric Supply Company in 1908 it was a small affair with about 1,400 consumers. Now it has risen to 8,000 with 150 employees. During the war he was a Coal Conservation Officer and made much of the apparatus used by the V.A.D. massage and electrical treatment department. He was one of the original members of the Cambridge Rotary Club and Commodore of the Cambridge Motor Boat Club 31 05 08b

1933

1933 11 16

Cambridge was thrown into a state of chaos by the failure of the electric light system over a very wide area. The breakdown started when lights grew dimmer and dimmer and finally went out altogether. Shops, offices and private homes brought candles into use. One ingenious garage owner switched on the lights of the cars in his shop window showrooms. At the CDN office reporters wrote by bicycle light and headlines were set by hand with the aid of a supply of wax tapers 33 11 16

1935

1935 03 07

Electricity supply company future - 35 03 07a & b 35 05 08 & a

1935 03 09

Cambridge council's decision not to purchase the 1890 electricity undertaking hardly came as a surprise. Only the members of the Labour Party who believe in public ownership of all utility services were in favour. The undertaking would have had to be split into two parts but the Company offered to reduce the price of supply by 25 per cent if the council waived their option. Several councillors are not averse to taking over the whole concern when it comes up again in 1945 35 03 09e

1938

1938 01 08

R.C. Pierce retired as general manager & engineer of the Cambridge Electric Supply Company. Since he came in 1909 the Company has changed almost out of recognition. None of the original generating plant remains; recently the old-fashioned 90 cycle single-phase supply was replaced by the modern 50 cycle three-phase system and whereas when he started the annual output was only 600,000 units now it has risen to 15 million. 38 01 08

1940

1940 06 07

After 50 years' service with the Cambridge Electric Supply Company, Mr. J.H. Taylor has just retired. He began when it was first formed in 1892. He was actually on the staff before the first power station was built. Nine years later he became secretary, an office which he has held for the past 39 years 40 06 07 CIPof

1947

1947

Nationalised under Electricity Act of 1947, boards constituted 1st January 1948 [3.1]

1947 12 03

It was a bewildering experience to visit the Cambridge Electric Supply Company's power station, Thompson's Lane, during one of yesterday's peak periods. Bewildering because of the steady hum of the generating plant, the mass of gauges and dials, the terrific heat thrown out as the inspection doors in the coal-burning "stokers" were opened and because of the comparatively small number of men engaged in controlling this veritable image of machinery. While the bulk of Cambridge's power is generated at the station a proportion comes off the nationally controlled "grid - 47 12 03

1948

1948 04 03

Some of the proud achievements of the Cambridge Electric Supply Company were recalled at the last meeting of the Company at the University Arms. The Company ceased to exist from April 1st having been absorbed by the Eastern Electricity Board, one of 14 boards set up under the new Electricity Act. The Cambridge company is one of the oldest in the electricity supply industry, and first started work of supplying electricity to the citizens of Cambridge in 1892. Today over 25,000 consumers are

supplied with electricity by the Company at prices which compare more than favourably with those made in towns similar in size 48 04 02

1949

1949 04 04

Cambridge, like the rest of Britain, shrugged off a little bit of austerity when display lights went on again after ten years. It was only a little bit. For every lit up shop window in the town centre there were at least ten wrapped in gloom. Many hotel and public house signs were illuminated and the "great light up" had a good send off at the flag-bedecked Regal cinema where Mr Morley Stuart, editor of the C.D.N. operated a specially installed master switch in the foyer. It was the Regal's 12th birthday, all but a day 49 04 04

1949 04 08

"I think within 20 years' time a considerable quantity of our electricity will be produced by the disintegration of uranium rather than the burning of coal", Dr T. Allibone told the British Electricity Authority's school at Cambridge. Within the next 30 years possibly all the world's power would be produced from uranium. "You will have to get rid of about 200 tons of fission products per annum. Where are you going to take it? What you produce is like radium. It is terribly dangerous, and goes on being dangerous for a decade". The problem of the disposal of radio-active fission products is one of the greatest sociological problems of the whole lot 49 04 08

1953

1953 01 12

A well-known figure for many years, Mr Robert Pierce, has died. He joined the old Cambridge Electric Supply Company in 1908 as manager and engineer and stayed until 1938 when he retired and was placed on the Board of Directors where he remained until the industry was nationalised in 1948. In his own private workshop he built a good deal of the equipment used at Addenbrooke's Hospital in the early days of X-ray. 53 01 12

1957

1957 08 03

The Eastern Electricity Board has installed V.H.F. Radio control in its mobile vehicles which range from heavy field vehicles to vans used by electricians engaged in house repairs. One lady from Bassingbourn telephoned to report a fault but before she put the receiver down the electrician was knocking on the door! The main transmitters run night and day allowing communication between vehicles and there is a portable transmitter that can be taken home by the controlling engineer in case of an emergency during the night. 57 08 03a

1958

1958

Works in conversion of electricity voltage from 200 to 250 volts begin

1959

1959 05 19

The inaugural meeting of the Cambridge Electrical Association for Women heard that when the Association started in 1924 electrical appliances were just beginning to find their way into the home. Housewives joined to get over the fear of electricity and to get the best value from their appliances. With machines men always want to know how they work and women are contented if they work but now they are giving a scholarship to a girl wanting to study engineering at Cambridge University. 59 05 19 & a

1959 08 20

Mackays of East Road has donated a Blackstone horizontal diesel engine to Freetown, Sierra Leone. The engine was first installed in 1930 and gave them complete independence to power cuts. It ran throughout the war with virtually no maintenance. They have completed the electrification of their

plant and John Mellanby, the well-known Cambridge electrician, suggested it be offered to the Technical Institute over there. Similar engines have been working at Heffers printing works and Coulson's wood mill 59 08 20

1963

1963 02

Thompson's Lane power station feature Feb 1963 [2.12]

1964

1964

Generating station can produce 7,000 kw hour but only used as peak periods [446.17.4]

1964 07 24

Electrical engineers are busy analysing the damage from recent storms. Special devices have been fitted to minimise damage – feature – 64 07 24

1964 11 13

Eastern Electricity's new Fens Sub-Area control room knocks spots off the old system used at Thompson's Lane. A huge panel displays the entire electrical network while control desks have radio communications and lists of emergency engineering staff who can be called out. There is a standby generator which starts automatically should the main power fails. All this is the work of Pye Ltd. There is not a second when it is left empty. But it is unlikely that full-scale automation will ever be introduced. 64 11 13

1965

1965 07 08

Thompson's Lane power station to close March 1966[2.2]

Works in conversion of electricity voltage from 200 to 250 volts, hoped to complete by 1971 when 25,000 consumers will have been put on new voltage which will be standard throughout City. Changeover to cost £249,000

1966 04 01

Electricity power station Quayside wreathed in scaffolding prior demolition – photo – 66 04 01

1966 04 23

Electricity generating works – scaffolding erected to demolish chimney – photo – 66 04 23a

1970

1970 12 10

Electricity strike cuts expected to black out central Cambridge – 70 12 10 [2.3]

1972

1972 02 11

Blackouts - cuts extended to 9 hours [2.4]

1972 03 23

Last house converted to 240 volts, 35,000 houses converted in 10 years [2.7]

1973

1973 11 07

Eastern Electricity this week produced a detailed rota and chart to help the public tell when their area would most likely suffer power cuts. A cutback in electricity supplies could take place tonight. Voltage reductions were feared during last night's period of peak demand - usually the largest of the week - but they were not necessary. The men's associations have agreed nationally with the electricity

industry that they should get special payments for “unsocial hours” they have to work, but the agreement has been blocked by the government 73 11 07 [2.8]

1974

1974 01 09

Cambridge has escaped lightly so far from the effects of the three-day working week. Only about 250 workers are being paid benefits by the Department of Employment. The vast majority of those temporarily laid off are receiving benefits from their own firms under a “do-it-yourself dole” scheme. The firms will be reimbursed later by the Department. At Saffron Walden the town’s largest firm, Acrow Engineering Ltd, are treating Thursdays and Fridays, when industry in the area is without power, as part of their workers’ normal holiday entitlement 74 01 09

1977

1977 11 05

Retailers in Cambridge city centre are angry because the power cuts threaten to deprive them of electricity for up to three hours every Saturday afternoon. They feel it is unfair that the same shops should face being cut off during a peak period every week. The manager of the Abbey Boutique said it could cost traders thousands of pounds. But Eastern Electricity say they have to think of the needs of all their consumers and the traders would do well to see how it goes this weekend before they start complaining 77 11 05

1980

1980 08 14

Working windmills may return to the East Anglian countryside – not to drain the fens or mill corn, but to generate electricity. Scientists at Cambridge University’s Cavendish Laboratory have been working on wind turbine design with the Central Electricity Generating Board who will shortly begin looking for an inland site for the first large wind-powered generating machine. These could be sited in flat lands where their impact on the environment would be less than on exposed hilltops. They would be mounted on towers 150 feet high and when their 200-foot blades turned each machine should generate enough electricity to heat 100 single-bar electric fires. 80 08 14b

1982

1982

Thompson’s Lane power station demolished [P.14]